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The Prevalence of Humbug

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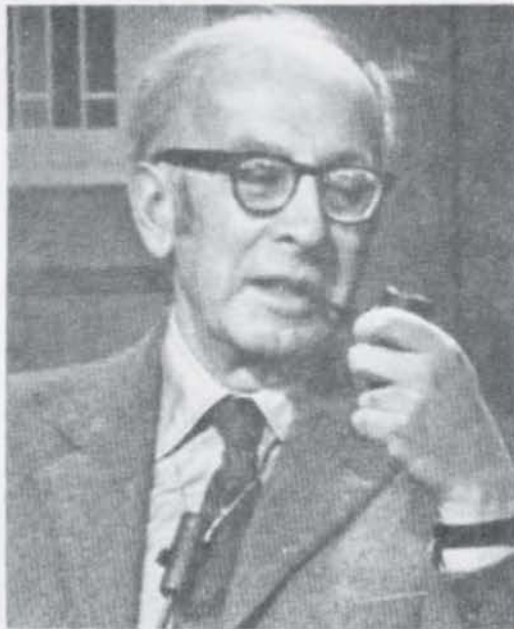
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The Prevalence of Humbug

by

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Contents

	Page
Introduction.....	2
Chekhov's lady.....	2
Bernard Shaw on disarmament conferences.....	2
The Shavian probe.....	3
Some preliminary comments.....	4
A short history of the word's shifting meanings.....	5
A good word for Barnum.....	6
Russell's tirade.....	8
Ghotbzadeh's indignation.....	9
Emerson's friendship.....	9
The Czar's vodka.....	11
Zaftig bedfellows.....	11
The Cornell ship.....	12
Academic humbug (Veblen).....	12
Misfires and violations.....	13
How humbug differs from lying.....	15
The complexities of self-deception.....	18
Humbug ineradicable?.....	21
Coping with humbug.....	22
Coda.....	23

The Prevalence of Humbug

Propaganda requires proper grease (Kingsley Martin)

Introduction

Humbug has the peculiar property of being always committed by others, never by oneself. That is one reason why it is universally condemned. No doubt we can agree that humbug is a Bad Thing; but what are we agreeing about? It proves astonishingly hard to say. In trying to understand what humbug is, which is my main purpose, one soon finds that there are no satisfactory definitions available. I therefore propose to use an inductive approach for the most part. I shall offer a number of varied examples for consideration, hoping that we can eventually arrive at some reasonably accurate analysis of this elusive concept. There should be time, also, to reflect upon the mischief that humbug can work, and to consider some ways of curbing the disposition to produce it.

Chekhov's lady

My first exhibit is drawn from Maxim Gorky's reminiscences of Chekhov:

Once a plump, healthy, handsome, well-dressed lady came to him and began to speak à la Chekhov: "Life is so boring, Anton Pavlovich. Everything is so grey: people, the sea, even the flowers seem to me grey.... And I have no desires...my soul is in pain...it is like a disease."

"It is a disease," said Anton Pavlovich with conviction, "it is a disease; in Latin it is called morbus fraudulentus."

Fortunately, the lady did not seem to know Latin, or, perhaps, she pretended not to know it.

Morbus fraudulentus, literally, "the fraudulent disease," is not listed in manuals of pathology, although the disorder is endemic, infectious, and seriously injurious to thought, feeling and action. The Latin label is too opaque for common use, but "humbug" serves nicely. Chekhov's lady provides us with a clear and uncontroversial example of humbug.

Bernard Shaw on disarmament conferences

My next example is taken from an interview granted by George Bernard Shaw to an American journalist (M.E. Wisehart) in 1930, on the eve of a naval conference. When the interviewer called the coming meeting a "disarmament conference," Shaw strenuously objected:

"Don't!" exclaimed Mr. Shaw. "Everyone knows it's an armament conference!... The question is not 'Shall we do away with armament?' but 'How much armament?'"

The interviewer referred to the preliminary conversations between the British prime minister and President Hoover as "an event of great historical importance," and

went on to say:

It is a harbinger of international understanding and good will. It has brought the English-speaking peoples together as never before and shown them that in sentiment, friendship, respect and good will they are united.

Shaw exploded:

"Do you really believe that?" he exclaimed.
"Humbug."

When the interviewer said "Why do you say 'humbug'?" Shaw replied:

"Because, generally speaking, Englishmen and Americans do not like one another. Now they are asked to pretend that they do. And this pretense of being affectionate cousins is as dangerous as poison. Better to confess our dislike--our hatred, if you please--and ask ourselves what it is all about. Then there would be the possibility of ridding ourselves of it."

The Shavian probe

Bernard Shaw's formula, "Do you really believe that?" is a useful device; but it needs to be generalized into "Do you really mean that?" in order to fit cases involving something other than belief. In this form, it is a useful blunt instrument that deserves a label. I propose to call it the Shavian probe.

Unfortunately, it won't always work. No doubt, a journalist who actually thought in terms of bringing nations "together as never before" so that they become "united" in "sentiment, friendship, respect and good will" would be well-advised to change his occupation--perhaps to that of a speech-writer for presidential candidates. So in the case I have cited, Shaw's accusation of humbug seems justified.

But what are we to make of the following episode? On January 25, 1980, Mary McCarthy said, in an interview with Dick Cavett on Public Broadcasting, that Lillian Hellman was "a bad writer, overrated, a dishonest writer." Well, true or false, justified or not, there was no humbug about that. But on being asked by Mr. Cavett what was dishonest about Miss Hellman's writing, Miss McCarthy continued: "Everything. I once said in an interview that every word she writes is a lie, including 'and' and 'the'." Well, did she really believe that one could lie by using the words 'and' and 'the'? Hardly--unless she was using 'lie' in some extraordinary and unusual sense. But no doubt Mary McCarthy was in earnest, and did mean what she said, was using just the words she wanted. Now that leaves the question of whether McCarthy committed humbug still unsettled: we have to undertake a difficult and controversial evaluation of the speaker's feeling and attitude.

According to Miss Hellman's lawyer, his client may get damages for defamation if she can show that "the person making the allegedly defamatory remarks

The Prevalence of Humbug

either knew them to be untrue or uttered them without caring whether they were untrue." A philosophical logician might object that truth, in the sense of conformity with ascertainable matter of fact, is not in point. Yet a writer can be dishonest while saying something that is neither true nor untrue: common sense would regard some caricatures as libellous even if they were uncaptioned. When the lawsuit is ultimately heard, it will be interesting to see how judge and jury will cope with the possibly extenuating effects of context--and with such controversial issues as the applicable legal constraints on emotive or offensive language.

Some preliminary comments

Chekhov's lady and Shaw's interviewer provide us with clear and uncontroversial cases of humbug. I think of them as touchstones of usage--"paradigm cases." For me, the two examples are cases of humbug if anything is: if you disagree, then your usage of the keyword differs in important respects from my own.

These paradigm cases have some readily discernible features that are worth noting, for future references in struggles with more controversial examples.

One reason why 'Humbug!' is so offensive an exclamation is that it charges the speaker with some kind of falseness. But in neither of our cases was the speaker supposed to be lying. For Chekhov's lady was not necessarily lying when she said that everything looked and felt "grey" to her: perhaps she used that very word in her private thoughts. Humbug need not entail lying in the strict sense of that word--even though humbug can be akin to outright lying.

We can usefully distinguish between the speaker's message, as I shall call it, and his or her stance. By the message I mean whatever is explicitly said about the topic in question; while I reserve the term 'stance' for the speaker's beliefs, attitudes and evaluations, insofar as relevant to the verbal episode in question. To illustrate: If you say to me in a confident way, "The plane leaves at four o'clock," you are not saying that you believe what you say, because that is not the topic on which you are supplying information. But of course, by speaking as you do, in a standard situation in which trustworthy information is normally expected, you are giving me reason to believe that you are not deliberately misleading me.

Similarly, Mary McCarthy, to return to the earlier example, was not saying that she despised the object of her scathing comments, nor was she overtly claiming to be sincere, but clearly she spoke as one who expected her remarks to be taken as a sincere expression of contempt. (Try saying: "She's disgusting--but of course I don't feel disgust." That would be a paradox: we could make some sense of it, but not without hard work.)

Now, the pejorative implication of a charge of humbug is commonly levelled against the content of a message (a remark, or a text) rather than at what I have called the speaker's stance: it then has the force of "Stuff and Nonsense," denigrating the message, without necessarily imputing falseness or insincerity. Consider the following mini-dialogue:

First speaker: "As McLuhan has taught us, the medium is the message." Second speaker: "Humbug!"

Here I take the second speaker to be rejecting McLuhan's absurd slogan, i.e. rejecting the substance of what is being said: there need be no imputation about the sincerity of the speaker's "stance." For he or she may genuinely regard McLuhan's widely quoted fragment of pseudo-wisdom as profoundly illuminating. No matter: without impugning a speaker's stance, we can sometimes condemn what is being said as balderdash, clap-trap, rubbish, cliché, hokum, drivel, buncombe, nonsense, gibberish or tautology. With so rich a vocabulary for dismissing the substance of what is said, we could dispense with this use of 'humbug.' That useful word might well be reserved for criticism of a speaker's stance -- to discredit the message's provenance, rather than its content. But I shall respect current usage by sometimes using 'humbug' in the sense of 'piece of humbug.'

What then is the *prima facie* charge against a speaker accused of humbug? Well, some of the words that immediately suggest themselves are: pretense, pretentiousness, affectation, insincerity and deception. Often, there is also a detectable whiff of self-satisfaction and self-complacency: humbug goes well with a smirk. A common symptom is 'clever-me'-ism, as in Jack Horner's case. In this respect, it resembles cant, which Dr. Johnson memorably defined as "A whining pretension to goodness, in formal and affected terms."

To say that humbug has something to do with insincerity and deception is to point in the right direction, but does not sufficiently identify the word's meaning. Let us see whether the history of the word's changing uses can provide a more specific analysis.

A short history of the word's shifting meanings

I used to think that the word 'humbug' came into general use in the nineteenth century--possibly because I took the Victorians to be especially prone to hypocrisy. To my surprise, I discovered that its career dates from the middle of the eighteenth century, when it seems to have entered the language as "a piece of fashionable slang" (Century Dictionary) of unknown origins. It may have been used originally in the restricted sense of a false alarm, a hoax or a practical joke. But its meaning was uncertain, even from the start. In 1751 a writer complains about it in the following terms:

There is a word very much in vogue with the people of taste and fashion, which though it has not even the 'penumbra' of a meaning yet makes up the sum total of the wit, sense and judgment of the aforesaid people of taste and fashion! [he gives quotations] Humbug is neither an English word, nor a derivative from any other language. It is indeed a blackguard sound made use of by most people of distinction! It is a fine make-weight in conversation, and some men deceive themselves so egregiously as to think they mean something by it!

The Student (1751), II, 41
[from Century Dictionary]

Dr. Johnson did not include the word in his dictionary (1775), possibly because he

The Prevalence of Humbug

thought it too coarse or vulgar to be noticed.

By 1828 the first edition of Webster's dictionary treats 'humbug' as an approximate synonym for 'swindle' or 'fraud'. As a noun, Webster says, it refers to "an imposition under false pretenses"; and as a verb it means "to deceive; to impose upon"—or, as we might nowadays say, "to con." So the relatively innocent old sense of a practical joke had made way by then for something more obnoxious.

Webster's Third New International Dictionary of 1966 contains the following entries:

(for the noun's head sense): "something designed to deceive and mislead" [with cross-references to QUACKERY, HOAX, FRAUD and IMPOSTURE]

(for the verb): "impose on" [with cross-references to DECEIVE, CAJOLE and HOAX]

(for its application to a humbugger): "a person who usually wilfully deceives or misleads others as to his true condition, qualities, or attitudes, one who passes himself off as something that he is not [with cross-references to SHAM, HYPOCRITE and IMPOSTER]

The general impression left by this rather confused set of definitions is of adherence to the strong nineteenth-century equation of a humbug with an imposter or swindler. But that identification fails to reflect present usage. If a main sense of 'humbug' were that of something designed to deceive and mislead, a skillfully constructed wig would have to count as a prime example. If a humbugger is a person who wilfully deceives others, then the pseudo-Arabs lately used by the F.B.I. to "sting" selected congressmen would be properly described as humbugs. Something is plainly wrong. By relying too much on the entries in earlier editions, the makers of Webster's Third have overlooked the present dilutions of the old intensely pejorative implications of 'humbug'. I hope that in the end we can do somewhat better. However, before examining some further examples of suspected humbug, I would like to pay homage to Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810-1891), now unjustly forgotten, but long regarded by Americans and English as a supreme humbug. I think this unfair to an extraordinary man, who deserves a better reputation.

A good word for Barnum

If Barnum is remembered at all today, it is as a presumptive co-founder of the still-flourishing Barnum and Bailey circus. The dubious attribution to him of the well-known quip that "There's a sucker born every minute" hints at a somewhat unsavory career: significantly, Neil Harris's fine biography (on which I have relied for details of Barnum's life and career) bears the title, Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum (Boston: Little Brown, 1973).

How many people realise today that Barnum was once an international celebrity, as widely known as, say, Charlie Chaplin in our own century? Or would suspect that he was widely admired, with affection and respect? When he died in 1891, Barnum's advertising escapades were forgiven, even by those who had been his severest critics. "French newspapers called him 'a great benefactor' and 'the

incomparable', whose name is immortal" (Harris, 280). And even the London Times, which had thundered its disgust at his unabashed self-promotion, handsomely concluded that "His death removes an almost classical figure... [H]is name is a proverb already, and a proverb it will continue until mankind has ceased to find pleasure in the comedy of the showman and his patrons--the comedy of the harmless deceiver and the willingly deceived" (Harris, 280).

Barnum did have many vehement detractors: one reviewer of his best-selling Autobiography called the book "the shameless confessions of a common impostor, who has taken money of the public by downright falsehood," charged him with "a narrow and heated mind," thought his success arose from the public's "fanaticism" and "greed," and castigated American affection for him as sympathy with trickery (Harris, 226). In England, the book's reception was even worse: Blackwood's called it Barnum's most daring hoax, which stimulated "amazement at its audacity, loathing for its hypocrisy, abhorrence for the moral obliquity which it betrays, and sincere pity for the wretched man who compiled it" (Harris, 227). Fraser's magazine claimed that Barnum would have been tarred and feathered in England (Harris, 228). Yet the target of such obloquy was graciously received by Queen Victoria, and had Horace Greeley, Mark Twain and Thackeray among his friends.

How is one to make sense of this confusing record? Was Barnum a vulgar and shameless swindler? I don't think that anybody who reads his entertaining Life would think so. Some of his earlier exploits did, to be sure, embarrass him in later life. For instance, his exploitation of the slave, Joice Heth, who claimed to have been George Washington's nurse and to be one hundred and sixty-one years old. (Though "partially paralyzed, totally blind and toothless, [she] was nevertheless very spirited, talking about her years with 'dear little George' and lapsing into occasional hymns" (Harris, 21). The crowds who flocked to see Joice--or, later, to examine the corpse of the "Feejee Mermaid"--could hardly have really believed her credentials or generally accepted Barnum's claims for the authenticity of his exhibits. It satisfied Barnum if they were sufficiently curious to pay the price of admission. His assiduously cultivated gifts were those of a magnificent showman and advertiser, who knew how to tickle and mystify his public. He was like the magician who seems to saw a young woman in half: the onlooker's fun is in trying to understand how the deception is worked: we are in the realm of illusion, not delusion.

What particularly endears Barnum to me is his robust sense of humor. Visitors to his great American Museum would see a notice reading "To the Egress"--which led them, not to yet another exotic animal, but only to the exit. When he built his extravagant mansion, "Iranistan," in Bridgeport, Connecticut, "a fantastic multiturretted oriental palace surrounded by gardens and fountains, filled with rosewood, marble, velvet, and lace" (Harris, 102), he would arrange for an elephant to be seen pulling a plow when a train came by!

I suggest, accordingly, that in spite of the now almost proverbial association between Barnum and the practice of imposture, he ought to be rather remembered as a supremely talented public entertainer, and not as some sort of swindler or deceiver. The crucial point is that in Barnum's most successful exploits his audience freely collaborated in the entertainment (as in the case of the great General Tom

The Prevalence of Humbug

Thumb, who really was a midget of extraordinary resourcefulness and talent): sometimes being offered a puzzle to be solved--but always getting their money's worth. If this is humbug, it ought to be regarded as harmless, involving a kind of innocent pretense akin to the celebrated suspension of disbelief that we accept as part of a good reader's response to literature or art.

In my opinion, then, Barnum's ingenious effort, in his book, Humbugs of the World, to distinguish his practice from that of common swindling or imposture, was eminently justified--even though he himself succumbed in the end to the prevailing ambiguities and included in the book many a story of sinister and indefensible public fraud.

Back now to further examples of clear cases and test cases.

Russell's tirade

Consider now the following glimpses of the private behavior of a famous philosopher. In his charming book, Remembering Russell, Rupert Crawshaw-Williams tells of a trip to inspect a house that was being remodeled for Bertrand Russell's use. When the two friends arrived, they had to suspend a lively discussion of a new book by the pragmatist F.C.S. Schiller. The builder and the architect were waiting to hear Russell's complaints.

Russell walked in, said good-morning, and--immediately, without any other preliminaries, without any working up of steam--he boiled over into a furious denunciation of everything that the builder and the architect had done and not done. His face got red, his voice rose an octave, he banged the builder's flimsy table.

The builder and the architect were so taken aback by this eruption that they were speechless for the first few minutes. They went pale with astonishment: their lips trembled.

Eventually the architect recovered himself. 'But, Lord Russell, you are not allowing for our difficulties. We simply could not get hold of the timber...'

'That is a lie!' said Russell, banging the table once again so that all the pencils and set-squares and boxes of nails bounced and rattled. 'There's no possible excuse.'

Later, the architect tried again: 'Lord Russell; I really do not see why we should take this...' 'I don't care what you see or don't see...' Russell would hardly allow either of them to finish a sentence. The tirade rolled over them until both of them were left floundering and gasping.

Russell ended off by demanding a complete change in their future behaviour. He stopped talking and walked smartly out to the car; we got in; I started the engine;

'So Schiller was really making the context of the statement part of its meaning,' said Russell.

Elizabeth and I were still stunned.

'But Bertie,' we said, 'you seem quite calm!'

'I am quite calm,' he said. 'That's taught them a lesson I think. hasn't it?'

'We certainly think they were impressed. Do you mean to say,' we asked, 'that the whole explosion was deliberate and contrived?'

'Yes indeed,' said Russell. 'it was the only thing to do--the only way of making an effect.'

'Well, I suppose it may work,' I said. 'But I did think you were being just a little bit unfair at times.'

'Unfair! Of course I was being unfair.'

Crawshay-Williams, reverting to a previous conversation, then said: "There you are...it's what we were saying last night: you're an aristocrat, and I'm merely a gentleman." Fair comment, although the English code forbids a gentleman to call himself a gentleman, except ironically.

Ghotbzadeh's indignation

At the end of January 1980, the Canadian government announced the escape of six American diplomats who had been sheltered in the Canadian embassy in Teheran.

One of the so-called "embassy militants" responded by crying "That's illegal! That's illegal!" (Associated Press, reported in the Cornell Daily Sun, January 30, 1980). When the Iranian Foreign Minister later met reporters, he took the same line, calling the secret operation a "flagrant violation" of international law (New York Times, 1/31/80:A22).

"They have violated the laws they claim to defend," Mr. Ghotbzadeh said of the Canadians. He denounced "so-called international laws" as having been made only "for the suppression of the small nations by the big ones" (NYT, 1/31/80:A 10).

To this egregious nonsense, Ghotbzadeh added a veiled incitement to violence--"Canada will pay" and "Everybody is free to do whatever they [sic] want,"--apparently intending "an open invitation to Iranians around the world to take action against Canada or Canadians." Also an allegation, that he must have known to be a lie, to the effect that he had received an apology from the Canadian Prime Minister, with an accompanying explanation that "the action had been for political reasons in Canada" (both immediately denied by Mr. Joe Clark).

In this farrago, I am particularly interested for present purpose in the role played by what is surely a prime case of humbug, the implicit presentation of the speaker (what I have previously called his "stance") as one who, himself respecting international law, is therefore entitled to complain of an alleged violation. Ghotbzadeh's own explicit denunciation of "so-called international law" merely adds to the confusion of what the Times editorial called his "flagrant logic."

Emerson's friendship

Ralph Waldo Emerson says the following about friendship, in his celebrated

The Prevalence of Humbug

essay with that title:

The moment we indulge our affections, the earth is metamorphosed: there is no winter and no night: all tragedies, all ennuis vanish,--all duties even; nothing fills the proceeding eternity but the forms all radiant of beloved persons. Let the soul be assured that somewhere in the universe it should rejoin its friend, and it would be content and cheerful alone for a thousand years.

Well, all of us have sometimes been kept waiting for a good friend, but a delay of a thousand years is, as the English say, "a bit much." But Emerson is relentlessly enthusiastic about friendship:

Happy is the house that shelters a friend! It might well be built, like a festal bower or arch, to entertain him a single day. Happier, if he know the solemnity of that relation and honor its law! It is no idle bond, no holiday engagement. He who offers himself a candidate for that covenant comes up, like an Olympian, to the great games where the first-born of the world are competitors. He proposes himself for contest where Time, Want, Danger, are in the lists, and he alone is victor who has truth enough in his constitution to preserve the delicacy of his beauty from the wear and tear of all these.

Surely there is something suspicious about this exaggerated rhapsodizing. Indeed the very last paragraph of the essay suggests that Emerson might really have preferred the kind of friend that need never be met:

It has seemed to me lately more possible than I knew, to carry a friendship greatly on one side, without due correspondence on the other. Why should I cumber myself with the poor fact that the receiver is not capacious? It never troubles the sun that some of his rays fall wide and vain into ungrateful space, and only a small part on the reflecting planet. Let your greatness educate the crude and cold companion. If he is unequal he will presently pass away; but thou art enlarged by thy own shining, and no longer a mate for frogs and worms, dost soar and burn with the gods of empyrean.

"It never troubles the sun that some of his rays fall wide and vain"--"Thou art enlarged by thy own shining." Enlarged or puffed up? Emerson sometimes reminds me of Mr. Pecksniff, who is described on his first appearance in Martin Chuzzlewit as "a moral man, a grave man, a man of noble sentiments, and speech." Dickens says of him (in connection with his calling his daughter Mercy a "playful warbler"):

"Playful--playful warbler," said Mr. Pecksniff. It may be observed in connexion with his calling his daughter "a warbler," that she was not at all vocal, but that Mr. Pecksniff was in the frequent habit of using

any word that occurred to him as having a good sound and rounding a sentence well, without much care for its meaning. And he did this so boldly and in such an imposing manner that he would sometimes stagger the wisest people with his eloquence and make them gasp again.

The Czar's vodka

The back cover of The New Yorker's issue of January 21, 1980 displays a richly colored photograph captioned "The spirit of the Czar lives on." We see an impressively bearded man, head tossed back, with a smidgeon of a smile, dressed in full regimentals, with scarlet jacket, white sash, and enough medals to start a collection. In one hand he holds a wine glass, with the other he is fondling the neck of a fine Borzoi. Meanwhile his Czarina, with an equally lavish display of evening dress and jewels, squats on the imperial carpet to play with a couple of Borzoi puppies. And the message? This, in part:

It was the Golden Age of Russia, and the Czar reigned supreme. Europe, Asia: all the empire was his. Regal coaches carried him in elegance, but with his Cossacks he rode like thunder. Hunting wild boar in the northern forests, hosting feasts for a thousand guests in the Great Palace, no man could match the Czar's thirst for life. And his drink? The toast of St. Petersburg. Genuine Vodka.

[I have omitted the trade name of what I think of as "Humbug Vodka."]

It would be a waste of time to criticize this text by asking such questions as why the pseudo-czar is wearing all those medals--or why he "rode like thunder," or whether he really did thirst for life as nobody else could--or what all this has to do with the barely perceptible difference between one vodka and another. We know that good sense and relevance have nothing to do with the case, the desired effect on the impressionable reader being achieved if favorable associations are created.

Zaftig bedfellows

Consider now the following item from the "Personal" columns of The New York Review of Books (February 21, 1980):

ZAFTIG FEMALE WANTED, NYC male, 35, editor/author, lean, reasonably good-looking, financially secure. Seeks woman Renoir would have painted, 25-35, with pretty face, stable personality. Excellent opportunity to share museums, movies, affluence, quiet conversations, caring, maybe marriage. NYR, Box 2956.

If you think this hard to beat for vulgarity, listen to the journal's own puff, on the same page, for its new English affiliate:

The Prevalence of Humbug

AMERICAN INTELLECTUALS too warm and bloody open for you? Prefer treacle in your tarts, not your mail? Tired of being mashed by provincial American bangers? Woo your very own little gooseberry fool abroad merely by running an accurate but winning Personal Ad in the columns of The London Review of Books.

A rare example of this puffing a go-between. It might be called pumping for a pimp --or meta-pimping.

The Cornell ship

Ceremonial and political occasions invite humbug. Here is a prime example from the early history of Cornell University:

On Inauguration Day, October 7, 1868, the new university had so many more students than it could handle that "the department of geology was confined to a single room adjoining the coal cellars, and demonstrations in natural history were conducted in the vacant space next to a furnace" (Becker, 132). The campus consisted partly of "a ravine six or eight feet deep, bridged by two dirt causeways" (Becker, 134). Against this kind of backdrop, George William Curtis delivered an elaborate address with the following peroration:

Here is our university, our Cornell, like the man-of-war, all its sails set, its rigging full and complete from stem to stem, its crew embarked, its passengers all ready and aboard; and even as I speak to you, even as the autumn sun sets in the west, it begins to glide over the waves as it goes forth rejoicing, every stitch of canvas spread, all its colors flying, its musical bells ringing, its heartstrings beating with hope and joy (Becker, 135).

"Complete from stem to stem"--and the students in the coal cellars! Andrew Dickson White, "looking out over the ragged cornfield and the rough pasture land and noticing the unfinished buildings and the piled-up rubbish," felt that no words "could fall more completely to express the reality" and Ezra Cornell confessed that there was "not a single thing finished" (ib.). Curtis, one might say, was operating on the principle of "Take care of the sounds and the nonsense will take care of itself." The sentiments were appropriately edifying, and the elaborately studied and rehearsed phrasing no doubt evoked the expected applause.

Academic humbug (Veblen)

Any survey of the varieties of humbug should include specimens of the pretentious verbiage that infests scholarly writing. I reproduce the following from Thorstein Veblen's book, "The Theory of the Leisure Class," partly for the pleasure of resuscitating Mencken's commentary on it.

In an increasing proportion as time goes on, the anthropomorphic cult, with its code of devout observances, suffers a progressive disinte-

gration through the stress of economic exigencies and the decay of the system of status. As this disintegration proceeds, there come to be associated and blended with the devout attitude certain other motives and impulses that are not always traceable to the habit of personal subservience.

Not all of these subsidiary impulses that blend with the bait of devoutness in the later devotional life are altogether congruous with the devout attitude or with the anthropomorphic apprehension of sequence of phenomena. Their origin being not the same, their action upon the scheme of devout life is also not in the same direction. In many ways they traverse the underlying norm of subservience or vicarious life to which the code of devout observances and the ecclesiastical and sacerdotal institutions are to be traced as their substantial basis. Through the presence of these alien motives the social and industrial regime of status gradually disintegrates, and the canon of personal subservience loses the support derived from an unbroken tradition. Extraneous habits and proclivities encroach upon the field of action occupied by this canon, and it presently comes about that the ecclesiastical and sacerdotal structures are partially converted to other uses, in some measure alien to the purposes of the scheme of devout life as it stood in the days of the most vigorous and characteristic development of the priesthood.

Here we have garrulity laced with jargon. Mencken says that Veblen "achieves the effect, perhaps without employing the means, of thinking in some unearthly foreign language--say Swahili, Sumerian or Old Bulgarian--and then painfully clawing his thought into a copious but uncertain and book-learned English" (66-67). As to the passages I have quoted from Veblen, Mencken concludes that Veblen is merely trying to say "that many people go to church, not because they are afraid of the devil but because they enjoy the music and like to look at the stained glass, the potted lilies and the rev. pastor" (69). He claims that "this highly profound and highly original observation" might have been written on a postage stamp, thereby saving a good deal of wasted paper.

Misfits and violations

With so many varied examples of humbug now before us, we can ask what it is about such episodes that inclines us to regard all of them, in spite of their obvious differences, as instances of the same complex phenomenon. Do we mean the same thing each time, or are we perhaps applying the pejorative label to cases connected only by shifting similarities, rather than by the presence of some detectable common property?

Let us first recall the great amount and variety of information normally transmitted in even the simplest and most familiar kind of conversation. Suppose the driver of a stationary automobile asks me the way to, say, Route 13: I would normally take for granted much concerning the speaker's situation and competence that is unsaid, indeed much that would mark the episode as perplexing if it were said: for

The Prevalence of Humbug

instance, that the driver wants to get to the highway in question, that he is en route to some other destination and that he doesn't know how to proceed. Also, on the evidence of his question, that he is a native English speaker, who knows what he is saying and hasn't made a slip of the tongue. Correspondingly, I assume that he himself is making parallel assumptions about my own understanding of his problem and his reliance upon my willingness to help. (I shall ignore any further information possibly conveyed by signs of anxiety, distress and the like.)

I propose to speak in such cases of the framing presuppositions of the initiated verbal transaction--or, more briefly, of the conversation's framework. Establishing the framework--an operation so commonplace that we normally fail to notice it--determines the character of the initiated conversation in a way that is crucially important for the possibility of a successful outcome. (Of course much talk has little discernible purpose, amounting to no more than friendly chatter or cocktail-party babble.)

The centrality of the role played by what I have called the conversation's framework can be highlighted by cases of wilful falsification of the presupposed understandings. Suppose that on being asked by a stranger, "Do you know the way to the campus from here?" I simply reply "Yes!" That will probably get me a look of resentful incomprehension, especially so if I respond to the further question, "Would you like to tell me how to get there?" By saying "No!" Please notice that, far from lying, I may be literally--yet quite inappropriately--telling the truth. In such a case I would of course be wilfully violating the conditions that normally make the kind of conversational exchange in question able to proceed. No doubt I would be resentfully regarded as "trying to be funny." If I then suffer a change of heart, pursue the departing stranger and, having caught up with him, say "Would you like me to tell you the way?" he might play the same down-putting game by saying "No!" (I have borrowed this example from F. C. Sparshott.)

I shall now contrast two different kinds of ways in which intended exchange of information may fail. The first type of case, which I shall call a misfire, results from ignorance or incompetence on the respondent's part: I might mishear the number of the highway in question, or get the number right but not know how to get there, or might even be suffering from some painful anxiety that made me unable to help. In the absence of such impediments I might be simply inept in giving intelligible and useful instructions. Such misfires--or as our President recently called them, in his usual euphemistic mode when caught blundering, "failures of communication"--are sufficiently common to induce caution in relying upon testimony or authority, however generally reliable and useful. But the risk of misfire is no ground for radical skepticism about the feasibility of successful communication at least in relatively unproblematic cases. If one stranger doesn't know the way, perhaps another does; if some passer-by is too stupid to understand my problem or too selfish to help, perhaps another will.

Far more serious than such occasional hitches in communication ("misfires" in my terminology) are breakdowns in communicative interaction induced by deliberate falsifications of the constitutive framework. To start with relatively innocuous but still potentially pernicious abuses of this sort: a prankster might perversely pretend not to understand the motorist's question, or even pretend to be unable to speak (pointing meaningfully at his own throat) or even deliberately

act as if he were a lunatic. (The case I previously considered of an absurdly literal interpretation of a polite formula would also fall under this heading.) In such a case I propose to speak of a violation of the standard framework. Violations, unlike misfires, are not the predictable and excusable consequences of human ignorance or incompetence. Violations maliciously trade upon and undermine the implicit understandings that underpin successful communication and co-operation, and hence erode the foundations of social existence. (Imagine a society in which joking was so common that one could never be certain whether communications were serious or maliciously disruptive.) Violations of the understandings that sustain communication must be regarded as perversions of verbal interaction, animated by deliberate deceit.

How humbug differs from lying

We have already seen that violations of the communicative framework need not consist in the utterance of falsehoods. If I reply on the telephone to the question "Have you got any sausages today?" by saying "No," and continue in the same vein, saying that I won't have any in the foreseeable future, and the like, everything I say might be literally true, but I would deceive the other as if I had deliberately lied. As William Blake said,

A truth that's told with bad intent
Beats all the lies you can invent.

(Auguries of Innocence)

However there is good reason to regard conscious and deliberate falsity--what Immanuel Kant calls "intentional untruthful declaration" (quoted by Bok, at p. 286)--as having primary theoretical importance. Sissela Bok, in her valuable recent book on "Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life" (New York, Vintage Books, 1978) is following a long-established tradition when she confines her discussion to explicit lying, defined as the production of an utterance expressing what the speaker disbelieves (op. cit., p. 14). Let us call such an utterance, with acknowledgement to Shakespeare, the lie direct. Until further notice, when I speak of lying I shall mean the forthright utterance, as if believed, of a proposition disbelieved by the utterer.

Moralists have long regarded brazen lying (the deliberate assertion of "the thing that is not"--or at least "the thing thought to be not") as meriting the severest reprobation. Montaigne said:

Lying is indeed an accursed vice. We are human beings, and hold together only by speech. If we knew the horror of it, and the gravity, we should pursue it with fire, and more justly so than other crimes.

("Of Liars," in The Essays of Montaigne, tr. E.J. Teichmann [New York, Oxford University Press, n.d.] vol. 1, p. 30)

The Prevalence of Humbug

In such statements as this, lying is depicted as a cardinal vice, an unforgiveable sin against humanity. Such a view led Immanuel Kant to claim--implausibly as I think--that we have an absolute duty not to lie, even when a truthful reply would lead an intending murderer to his victim! If this rigoristic condemnation of lying and the corresponding elevation of truthfulness to something like a supreme virtue were justified, it would be hard to understand the absence of reference to lying in the Ten Commandments (except in the special prohibition against "bearing false witness") or in other religious compendia of vices and virtues.

The traditional defenses of such rigorism are unconvincing. Kant, like other writers on the subject, notices the damage inflicted upon the liar himself, but reserves his most earnest condemnation for the damage inflicted by a lie on all mankind. But as much can be said about all vice: every criminal injury to an individual also damages the moral fabric of society. Nor is a lie the worst injury: violence and willful cruelty might be regarded as at least equally damaging to the moral character of the perpetrator and a violation of general obligations needed for social life.

A plausible justification of the prominence assigned to the vice of lying is suggested by glossing Montaigne's contention that as human beings "we...hold together only by speech." It is obvious that a child could not learn to speak if surrounded only by adults who lied to him irresponsibly and at random. For in such an environment he could not even learn the common names of familiar objects. Closely connected with this point is the familiar observation that the liar is parasitic upon general, though not universal, veracity: lying, as a species of deceit, would be futile in the absence of general efforts to be truthful. It seems reasonable to conclude that a liar is, in a radical way, sapping the foundations of social institutions, all of which depends upon the general effectiveness of speech. The liar is indeed an "enemy of society," who tends to undermine all possibility of civilized intercourse. Universal lying would destroy intelligible speech.

Still, an endorsement of Montaigne's emphasis upon the gravity of shamelessly explicit lying needs some supplementation, if it is not to be misleadingly one-sided. The immediate harm done by a successful lie direct--the deceitful generation of a false belief by concealed violation of the standard framework--can often be achieved more efficiently, and with less fear of detection or reprisal, by indirect means. One can intimate "the thing that is not" by implication, by significant silence, or even by the double bluff of pretending to lie while actually speaking the truth (as in the classical Minsk-Pinsk joke). (The annals of espionage are a rich source for this kind of deception.) Such maneuvers, a common resource of advertising and diplomacy, are secure against the accusation of explicit and knowing mendacity: the offender can always plead that he didn't literally say anything that he himself disbelieved. Given the prevalence and effectiveness of such indirect ways of achieving the disreputable benefits of lying, it is surprising that we have no better label for indirect verbal deception than the lawyer's tag of suggestio falsi. We might perhaps speak in such cases of virtual lying. (Cf. Webster's definition of the relevant sense of 'virtual' as "being functionally or effectively but formally not of its kind.")

With virtual lying, we are at last in the close neighborhood of the kind of humbug which "functionally or effectively" implants false belief. For in such cases there is characteristically a conscious discrepancy between the utterer's beliefs and

the false beliefs to be implanted. Such cases cannot properly be regarded as cases of outright lying or even virtual lying, but are all the more pernicious for that reason. The man who composed the vodka advertisement probably believed that the drink he was puffing was virtually indistinguishable in taste and sedative power from any of the competing brands on the market. In eschewing direct lies or even, for the most part, virtual lies for which he might be accountable, he was relying upon the powerful forces of suggestion and association--with all of the flummery of the Czar's legendary court and so on--to implant what would have been a naked lie if explicitly stated. The difference between such cases of humbugging deception and outright or even virtual lying is not in the content of the communicated message, nor in the intention to deceive by implanting false beliefs, but rather in the sophistication of the means used to achieve the purpose.

The continuities between explicit lying, virtual lying and what I now propose to call falsidical humbug (I borrow the term "falsidical" from Quine), have tempted many writers to regard the conventional distinction between lying and humbug as superficially and ultimately misleading. Indeed some writers will assimilate to lying even relatively harmless efforts to make a good public showing:

Thus, Adrienne Rich, in her notes on lying says:

We have expected to lie with our bodies: to bleach, redden, unkink or curl our hair, to pluck eyebrows, shave armpits, wear padding in various places or lace ourselves, take little steps, glaze finger and toe nails, wear clothes that emphasized our helplessness.

("Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying (1975)," reprinted in On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose [New York, Norton, 1979], p. 188), my italics.)

(One supporting myth regards only nudity as genuinely natural and "truthful," all concealment and clothing being counted as hypocritical.)

The tendency here illustrated to convert similarities into supposedly profound underlying identities (dressing and personal adornment as "really" the same thing as lying) is a constant temptation for philosophically inclined scholars in search of excitingly paradoxical insight. For a splendid example one might turn to George Steiner and his startling rediscovery of "the creativity of falsehood" (After Babel [New York, Oxford University Press, 1975], page 220) which he characterizes as "a seminal, profound intuition" of the Greeks [ibid.]).

Linguists and psychologists (Nietzsche excepted) have done little to explore the ubiquitous, many-branched genus of lies.... Constrained as they are by moral disapproval or psychological malaise, these inquiries have remained thin. We will see deeper only when we break free of a purely negative classification of 'untruth', only when we recognize the compulsion to say 'the thing which is not' as being central to language and mind. We must come to grasp what Nietzsche meant when he proclaimed that 'the Lie--and not the Truth is divine!' (Op. cit., pp. 221-222).

The Prevalence of Humbug

Steiner quotes Nietzsche again, approvingly, as saying, in The Will to Power:

There is only one world...and that world is false, cruel, contradictory, misleading, senseless.... We need lies to vanquish this reality, this "truth," we need lies in order to live (Op. cit., 227).

Steiner seems himself to endorse the view that "lying is a necessity of life" by which "man violates an absurd confining reality" in a way that "is at every point artistic [and] creative" (ibid.).

This confused and shoddy defense of lying is what Bentham would have called "nonsense on stilts." Steiner here seems to be emulating that kind of German metaphysician of whom Carlyle said none could dive deeper or emerge muddier. It is a prime example of the kind of academic or scholarly humbug which consists of saying more than you can reasonably mean, for the sake of the booming sound of your periods (what the older rhetoricians called "Bomphoiologia"). If you fail to make the distinctions that I have been proposing between plain lying, virtual lying, pretentious inflation of belief, and so on, proceeding so far, in Steiner's case, as to regard hypothetical if-then statements as cases of lying, you will end with a kind of conceptual gruel in which everything looks like everything else and all intellectual distinctions have vanished in the service of grandiose obfuscation.

Still, a decent respect for the conceptual distinctions between plain and fancy lying, and the allied but distinguishable varieties of deceptive humbug, such as I am here advocating, leaves as yet undiscussed the question of relative harm. The subversive effects of the brazen liar, in undermining the foundations of linguistic institutions, might be compared to the gross outrages of violating the constitutive bases of other institutions. There is something peculiarly horrible and monstrous about a judge who accepts bribes, a farmer who adds poison to his corn, or a doctor who infects patients in order to ensure a steady income. But the adulteration of food, to stay with that example, may, in the not very long run, be even more harmful than outright poisoning. The most serious indictment of falsidical humbug is that, without striking at the roots of linguistic institutions, it tends progressively to adulterate speech and thought. As a recent writer has well said:

[The] distortion of values, this insidious numbing of what we once knew without question as true or false, can be blamed, in part, on the language we hear and read every day and night.

M. F. K. Fisher in L. Michaels and C. Ricks, The State of the Language (Berkeley 1980), p. 270.

The complexities of self-deception

When humbuggers say what they themselves disbelieve, evading the risks of lying, while reaping its benefits, the gross discrepancy between utterance and actual belief (the speaker's "stance") can sometimes be established beyond all reasonable doubt. If the perpetrator rebuffs the "Shavian probe"--"Do you really believe that?"--by insisting that he or she really did believe it, bolstering the original humbug by a brazen lie, tone, facial expression or actions may expose the fraud. I call

such conscious deception "first-order humbug."

Humbug is often less obvious and forthright: Suppose a college student tells Nabokov that he is the greatest writer since Gogol (an imaginary but plausible episode). Any eavesdropper who knew the student's shaky standing in Nabokov's course on Russian literature might question the flatterer's sincerity; but how is the imputed "bad faith" to be established against reiterated protestations of sincerity? If we suppose the flatterer to be subjectively "honest" we might still impute self-deception. If so, we shall have a good example of a self-humbucker producing what I shall call "second-order humbug."

Although self-deception is at least as common as lying, there is a difficulty in understanding how it can possibly occur. Consider the conditions for successful deception of one person by another. If somebody else is to be successfully deceived, what I say must seem initially plausible and my assertion of it must provide some reason for the other's acceptance. Hence, my own disbelief must be concealed. Should any of these conditions be violated, the attempted deceit will fail: if you say that you are the illegitimate son of the monarch, as one of the British spies used to do, your hearer will probably think that you must be joking (the intended effect!); if you show by a wink that you don't believe what you say, your hearer will not succumb to the intended deception. The deceptive appearance must masquerade as reality.

Now how can one hide one's own disbelief in an intended act of private deception? Is it not absurd to say to oneself, "I don't believe such and such and yet I am going to believe it?" One cannot be an authority for oneself and nothing that I know that I disbelieve can be a reason for me to believe it. And how can I fail to know my own disbelief?

Thus the following argument for the impossibility of self-deception seems to be conclusive: Humbug requires concealment of a deceptive intent; but if the speaker and the audience are identical, as in soliloquy, there can be no such concealment; so there can be no such thing as self-deception.

One might respond by pointing to clear cases of what we call self-deception--as when a woman shows by her words and actions that she still believes in her son's survival, although possessing proof of his death in battle. Anybody persuaded by the impossibility argument would presumably retort that what happens in such an instance is misdescribed as deception and ought properly to be called something else. But this would amount to an arbitrary change in language--motivated by nothing better than obstinate defense of a dubious argument.

The impossibility argument is underpinned by the following conceptions: "Either you know that you believe what you say or else you don't. And in either case you can't be mistaken." Knowledge of one's own belief is immediately accessible; and there is no middle term between belief and disbelief. Both contentions are wrong: knowing one's momentary belief is not, like a sneeze, a "hit or miss" affair; and various degrees of awareness may be involved.

Consider the following typical example. Before meeting my doctor to hear the latest report on some chronic affliction, I resolve to "take a cheerful view." Then, while the doctor talks, I withdraw attention from, "blank out," anything that begins to sound like bad news, while attending closely to encouraging remarks. In this way, I end by genuinely believing a comfortable but wrong conclusion,

The Prevalence of Humbug

based upon deliberately selected and distorted evidence. When I "closed my ears" in this way against a sentence that starts with "Unfortunately your blood pressure..." so that I barely hear the rest of the sentence, did I know what the doctor said? Did I believe what he said? Was I aware of using a strategy of selective attention in support of a predetermined verdict? In each case the answer has to be "Yes and No".

Did I hear the bad news about the blood pressure? Unless I am an unusually talented self-deceiver, I probably did--as shown by the fact that I might reluctantly be able to dredge it up into full consciousness. But the censored news was relegated to "the back of my mind"; I knew it as I know that I am writing a letter, when attending to something other than the act of writing. One might say that I had "twilit" awareness of the suppressed material. (There is no need yet to invoke the unconscious.) Did I believe what I heard in this "twilit" way? Again, Yes and No. Yes, because unless I did believe it, on my doctor's unquestioned authority, I had no need to suppress it; No, since I managed to prevent the very question of belief from rising into full consciousness. Parallel verdicts apply to the overall program of selective attention and wishful distortion that I executed. I knew what I was doing as I know that I am walking even while thinking about something else; but having a normal distaste for distortion of evidence, I need to ignore my disreputable strategy.

The foregoing analysis of what might be called, in Sartre's terminology, "bad faith" (*mauvaise foi*) seems to fit the most familiar cases of self-deception. It may not fit severe cases of the repression of unwelcome thoughts or tidings, where the strategy of selective attention and rejection can induce neurotic symptoms. But it does fit such testimony as the following, from a recent discussion of obesity:

Even while on a binge [of gobbling] one vows to start a diet tomorrow and emerge from it miraculously transformed.

(Sylvia Robinow, reviewing Marcia Millman, *Such a Pretty Face: Being Fat in America* [Norton], *New Republic*, April 12, 1980:35)

A further feature of the process of selective attention and repression of unwelcome input, in the service of what might be called "wishful acceptance," deserves notice. In brushing aside the "bad news" of which he is at least partly aware, the self-deceiver makes the welcome "good news" part of his consciousness, part of himself, as it were, while doing his best to pretend that what he partly heard and would like to forget simply did not happen. But it did happen and he knew that it did. So there is a kind of dissociation at work--as in the familiar cases of motives that are suppressed as unworthy. So long as the self-deceiver is in the initial stages of the process sketched above, he has a "divided self," a state of strain that is disagreeable to all but accomplished hypocrites.

But the constant practice of self-deception may produce a character that cheats as effortlessly as a bird sings: the mask eventually becomes ingrown, fits the face as closely as a death mask. Exposure of such inveterate self-deception is difficult, since it requires a critical judgment of a whole way of life. When we are

coping with confirmed hypocrisy, rather than momentary self-deception, a verdict of humbug seems euphemistic.

Yet the exposure of episodic self-deception is sometimes both practicable and useful. "Second-order humbug" can sometimes be detected, even if the producer is unshakeably convinced of subjective honesty and sincerity. It would itself be an act of humbug, however, to suppose that the critic can pride himself upon being free from the incidence of self-deception. Selective and differential attention, repression, and dissociation are features of all perception and thought. And even "wishful acceptance" is not necessarily reprehensible, when it leads to beneficial results, at least in the short run. Should we denigrate the "wishful belief" that one is going to win a contest when self-verifying predictions are involved?

Humbug ineradicable?

Ought implies can, say the moralists. So before considering anti-humbugging remedies, we ought first to hear the vehement objections of those who consider such a project dangerously quixotic because, as one recent writer has put it, "deception is an inevitable aspect of human action." That quotation comes from a critical review of Sissela Bok on lying--the only adverse notice of her book that I have come upon--by David Bazelon (in the Times Literary Supplement, August 11, 1978, pp. 908-910).

Bazelon reproaches Bok for exclusive attention to outright and explicit lying--which he regards as a "disastrous" limitation--and he heartily dislikes her recommended maxim that "no one should lie except on the rarest occasions." Bazelon thinks such concentration on the impracticable "best" will "unavoidably assure that lesser forms of deception will be used more frequently, accompanied by a greater sense of virtue." He himself (a "lumper" rather than a "splitter") wants attention to be paid to "the phenomenon of deception in full, rich context." Lying should always be regarded, he claims as "the major form of modern power," short of actual violence, and hence "an actual or potential aspect of all action involving two or more people." Convinced as Bazelon is, then, of the ubiquity and inevitability of lying as an exercise of power over the deceived, he ends with the following remarkable conclusion:

Once the ubiquity of deception is appreciated, and also its central relation to power, the need of power to achieve one's purposes, the issue clearly becomes--which lie to tell, when, to whom, and for how long (italics in original).

Now since Bazelon is operating with so broad and comprehensive a definition of lying as a mode of deception, his argument, if sound, ought to apply equally well to humbug. Indeed, I am sure he would regard humbug as merely a special case of lying. Applied then to humbug, his train of thought would seem to be something like the following: Verbal humbug is an instrument for exerting power, by deception, over others; and such ubiquitous exercise of power is an ineradicable aspect of the human condition. Well, these might be his premises; but what is his implied conclusion? No doubt, that the only sensible questions are (to echo his remarks

The Prevalence of Humbug

about lying) how to humbug, and when, to whom and for how long. This view might appeal to anybody impressed by the prevalence of humbug in human affairs: but before succumbing to its attractive cynicism, we ought to notice that the supporting argument is invalid. Think of parallel reflections about, say dirt or infection: that perfect cleanliness is a mirage, and so the only questions sufficiently practical to be worth considering are how much dirt to tolerate and in which circumstances. As a correction to an impracticable perfectionism, the position is acceptable. But what is indefensible is surely the barely concealed suggestion that there is no harm in dirt, or that nothing needs to be done about it. It would be a gross example of the fallacy, for which there is no special label, of arguing from ideal impracticability to permissive laissez faire. We need not be committed to the utopian project of a society completely free from humbug in order to hold, as I do, that the evil should be combatted to the best of our ability. Humbug might well be as ineradicable as degeneration and death; but that is a poor reason for indifference or complacency.

Coping with humbug

I shall now try to keep my original promise to say something useful about how to cope with humbug. I hope you will agree that while humbug has the short-term advantages of devious hypocrisy over naked felony, it is indeed an insidious and detestable evil.

In order to cope with humbug we need, of course, to be sensitive to its occurrence. One soon develops a nose for it: indeed there is a danger of becoming over-sensitive and tiresomely overzealous in its exposure.

For short-term remedies, I recommend first the ploy that I earlier called the "Shavian probe"--the deliberately naive and rather impolite challenges expressed by the questions, "Do you really believe that?" and "Do you really mean that?" (If the answer is Yes--one might then use one of G.E. Moore's favorite expressions: "How extraordinary!") A more elaborate maneuver is to take the humbugging formula literally, in order to reveal its latent exaggerations and absurdities. Thus, if somebody solemnly delivers the shoddy bit of proverbial wisdom that "The exception proves the rule," one might trump it by saying "Quite so: the more exceptions, the better the rule!" But a more useful therapy is to translate humbug into plain and clear English. Such translation is especially effective in coping with learned humbug. (The abuse involved is a kind of converse of the Emperor's clothes --too many clothes and no emperor!) Strongly to be recommended, also, are humor, parody, and satire. (The glorious response, for instance, of the philosopher Samuel Alexander, in his deaf old age, shaking his ear-trumpet with laughter on being introduced to a Harvard professor: "I must be getting very deaf--I thought you said he was a professor of Business Ethics!") Certain basic texts are very helpful: for instance, Swift's "Modest Proposal," Sydney Smith's "Noodles Oration," Flaubert's dictionary of received opinions, Frank Sullivan's interviews with Mr. Arbuthnot, the cliché expert, and some of the splendid parodies of Russell Baker.

Fortunately, literature provides wonderful portraits and caricatures of supreme humbugs--Dickens's Pecksniff, Uriah Heap, Podsnap and many more; Molière's Tartuffe and Alceste; and the "confidence men" of Melville and Thomas Mann.

And much can be learned from a long line of exemplary anti-humbuggers: among whom I would include Dr. Johnson, Samuel Butler, Sydney Smith, Chekhov, George Orwell, Nabokov, E. B. White, and Adlai Stevenson.

Coda

It would be satisfying to be able to end with some concise and accurate definition. The best I can now provide is the following formula:

HUMBUG: deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, especially by pretentious word or deed, of somebody's own thoughts, feelings or attitudes.

This covers only first-degree humbug. For second-degree humbug, produced by a self-deluded speaker or thinker, the unsatisfactory reference to thoughts, etc., would need replacing by something like "thoughts etc. that might be revealed by candid and rational self-examination." I must leave the problems concealed in this all-too-brief formulation for another occasion.

A good way to end is by recalling Barnum's warning that the greatest humbug of all is one who sees humbug everywhere.